

## EMERGING ARTIST

Y T I O I S



# Vachagan Narazyan

*Вач.*

### BIRTHPLACE

Kislovodsk, Russia

### CURRENT HOME

Kharkiv, Ukraine

### DESCRIPTION OF WORK

"Life is a theater," proclaims painter Vachagan Narazyan. "My paintings reflect the timeless drama of life." The artist's thickly layered canvases are peopled by curious but approachable characters who invite viewers to enter their strange worlds and ascribe meaning to their sweet, mysterious smiles. With a nod to the classical style of Renaissance masters, Narazyan is a poetic storyteller who combines childhood nostalgia with his reality of working as a nonconformist artist in the pre-Glasnost Soviet Union. "An artist has an opportunity to create his own world," Narazyan explains of the calling that sent him underground and made him risk imprisonment for refusing to paint in the mandated Socialist Realism style.

### METHOD OF WORK

Narazyan prefers improvisation. He doesn't make preparatory sketches of compositions; he even skips drawing directly on the canvas prior to painting. He begins each work with a blank canvas, using a rich but subdued palette and a delicate touch of the brush, trying, he says, to "renew an experience" of



*"Mask"*

oil on canvas

48" x 58"



*"Trapeze"*

oil on canvas

28" x 20"



*"Shapito II"*

oil on canvas

24" x 24"



*"Solo Performance"*

oil on canvas

27" x 20"

works by the Old Masters. On some canvases he starts with tempera and watercolor, then adds oil paint. "I work slowly, using many layers that leave a trace on the canvas each day," he explains. "Sometimes the layers have a transparent quality and one can see the previous layers through the second layers."

#### FAVORITE SUBJECT MATTER

"My favorite subjects are the old circus, the culture of the Renaissance, Velázquez and my family," Narazyan says. "Every subject has several versions of perception, so everything in my art should be a little bit enigmatic." Indeed, what the viewer personally interprets in Narazyan's artworks is as much the narrative as the artist's own vision when creating the canvases.

#### PLAYERS AND CHARACTERS

"When I was a child, I watched the traveling circus Shapito come to town and set up in front of my grandparents' home," Narazyan recalls. "They put up a big tent and played music. Since then I have always loved clowns and mimes." Such fanciful players frequent Narazyan's works, and the artist sometimes uses his children as prototypes for the figures. For example, the clowns are images of his son, Victor; the girls are patterned after his daughter, Masha. "As my children grow, I see the characters changing," he notes. He paints these figures as though they are caught in one fleeting moment, and the gauzy atmosphere surrounding them makes the viewer think that if he blinks, perhaps the fantastic scene might vanish.

#### SYMBOLISM

Narazyan says his paintings entice viewers to enter into an "active dialogue" with them. And this dialogue has its own vocabulary, exemplified by recurring motifs. "Human beings are so vulnerable in this fragile world," the artist says in explanation of the prominent scaffolding-like "protective" structures that encircle so many of his characters. The black-and-white sticks held by other figures—most notably the tightrope walkers, who symbolically balance between Russia's past and present—illustrate the characters' boundaries or limitations. The triangular patterns worn by the harlequins are an homage to traditional Russian designs and, thus, its artistic heritage. Finally, scan most paintings carefully and you'll find Narazyan's ubiquitous egg—a symbol of hope for rebirth of the now-independent nations that formerly comprised the Soviet Union.

#### FIRST ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

As a young child, Narazyan always liked to draw, model and paint—an interest that was encouraged by his grandparents, who raised him. At age 4 he enrolled in sculpture classes. "My



*"Absurd Travel III"*

oil on canvas

12" x 55"



*"Six of Hearts"*

oil on canvas

24" x 12"

first artistic inspiration was connected to a small painting, 'Knight Defeated a Dragon,' by an unknown German painter that hung in a relative's apartment," Narazyan recalls. "I could look at this painting for hours and create my own compositions of this subject. Today, I admire the Old Masters' virtuosity and masterly technique, combined with the spirituality of their artworks."

#### **MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSON**

Narazyan was trained at the Kharkiv Art and Industrial Institute from which he graduated in 1979. There, professor Boris Vasilyecich Kosarev, a legend in the Soviet School of Art, gave him an "inestimable" knowledge of art. "This old teacher of many artists was a famous scene designer and an erudite person," says Narazyan, who also served as Kosarev's assistant. "He was a witness to many remarkable events of Russian culture and shared stories of great artists, poets, writers, actors and movie and theater directors with whom he had creatively collaborated during his long life."

#### **BIGGEST BREAK**

Narazyan's career took off in Germany in the early 1990s with the opening of several one-man and group shows. However, his biggest U.S. break occurred in 1995 when 20 of his paintings were featured in "Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union: From Gulag to Glasnost," a collection of Russian works from The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection, which was shown at the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Though his works can be found in the prestigious public collections of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, the Artists Unions of Ukraine and Russia, and the Kharkiv Art Museum, he is still relatively unknown to American audiences.

#### **PRICE RANGE OF WORK**

\$2,000–9,500

#### **GALLERY REPRESENTATIVES**

James Yarosh Associates Gallery, 55 E. Main St., Holmdel, NJ 07733. (732) 332-0056. The Lillian Berkley Collection—A Fine Art Gallery, 128 E. Grand Ave., Escondido, CA 92025. (760) 480-9434.

—Patti Verbanas  
Portrait by Paul Bowers